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ABSTRACT

Defining regularity in the English language is not a straightforward matter because of the complex relations between sound and spelling. Predictable patterns are those spellings that can be readily predicted from pronunciation. Rare and unpredictable spellings are found only in a small set of words--probably 10% or less of the vocabulary in English. However, the boundary between rare and frequent unpredictable patterns is unclear. Since rarity has no absolute values, such distinctions in instruction must be made on other grounds such as the usefulness of the words. A three-way categorization, which parallels a linguistic classification based on sound-to-spelling correspondences and which also includes eight categories relevant to learning to spell, seems most suitable for the design and development of spelling instruction. These three categories are based on the type of learner behavior appropriate for different words and rules. The first class (predictable spellings) covers words that students should be able to spell simply by listening to the sounds and applying the rules that have been taught. The second class (unpredictable and rare spellings) covers words that must be memorized by sight, and the third class (unpredictable but common spellings) covers words in which the sounds should help students know how the words may be spelled, but students must learn the words by memory or must check in a dictionary in order to determine the exact spelling. (HOD)

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REGULARITY AND IRREGULARITY IN ENGLISH SPELLING AND IN SPELLING INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The nature of regularity in English spelling is reviewed, and three categories of sound-to-spelling correspondences are linguistically defined: predictable, frequent but unpredictable, and rare and unpredictable. It is noted, however, that regularity may be a more complex matter for spelling instruction, for which at least eight categories are possible. A revised version of the three-way classification of regularity, based on learner behavior and encompassing linguistic and pedagogical categories, is suggested for the design and development of spelling instruction.

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Bruce Cronnell

Considerable evidence is available indicating that English spelling is, for the most part, regular and rule-governed (Russell, 1975). However, it is not completely regular. This paper is an attempt to categorize regularity in a description of English spelling and to determine the role of such categories in spelling instruction.

Because of the complex relations between sound and spelling in English, defining regularity is not a straightforward matter. Venezky (1970) has perhaps best categorized these relationships into three kinds of patterns: predictable, frequent but unpredictable, and rare and unpredictable. (The present author independently set up three similar categories: rules, semi-rules, and sight words [Cronnell, 1970].)

Predictable patterns are, as expected, those spellings that can be readily predicted from pronunciation. (Exceptions to these patterns are minor and thus are ignored here, e.g., the spelling of /č/ in cello, of /v/ in of.) Some predictable patterns are invariant; that is, the same spelling is used for one sound in all cases. Invariant spellings are rather rare and apply to only a few consonants and vowels, e.g., /v/ → v; /θ/ and /ð/ → th, /æ/ → a. More commonly, predictable patterns involve variant spellings that can, however, be predicted on the basis of environment; e.g., /č/ is spelled ch except when after a short vowel, where the spelling is tch. Predictable spellings can be learned by rule, although the variant patterns may involve somewhat complex environments.

When discussing frequent but unpredictable patterns, Venezky (1970, p. 270) notes that "Many sounds have variant spellings which cannot be predicted, but which occur frequently enough to merit special attention," e.g., final /o/ → o, ow, oe. Such spellings must be learned in groups of words.

Rare and unpredictable spellings are found only in a small set of words (probably 10% or less of the vocabulary of English), e.g., /v/ → f in of, /ɪ/ → o in women. Such spellings have very limited applicability, although they often occur in frequently used words.

Venezky indicates the relationship between these categories and learning to spell.

> The value of this tripart classification in that it separates spelling patterns according to the behaviors which we would expect good spellers to acquire. Predictable patterns, while they may require a concern for environment, are transferable to any word containing the sounds involved. Variant-predictable patterns require attention to such features as position, stress, or following sounds, but can still be transferred once the appropriate features are known. Unpredictable patterns cannot be transferred to new occurrences of the same sounds, but while one anticipates seeing certain frequent, unpredictable patterns in new words, one does not expect to see the rare, unpredictable patterns there. The difference between the two classes is, then, that the first occurs in an open-ended set of words and the second occurs in a closed set. (1970, p. 270)

However, the boundary between rare and frequent unpredictable patterns is unclear. For example, is final /e/ → ey "rare" or are its seven or so words "frequent"? Since rarity has no absolute values, such distinctions in instruction must be made on other grounds (e.g., usefulness of the words).

The SRA spelling series (Day and Lightbody, 1970, p. T1), for which Venezky was the linguistic consultant, employs these three categories of spelling patterns, coded by color:

- "Words learned through regular spelling patterns" are printed on green, "suggesting the go-ahead message of a green traffic light."
- "Words learned through pattern association" are taught in groups "with a common but not regular pattern." These words are printed on yellow, "indicating that caution should be used in applying the pattern to new words."
- "Words learned by sight" are "essential words with exceptional spelling . . . taught individually." These words are printed on red to indicate "that the spelling is so unusual that it can hardly ever be transferred to another word with the same sound." Included in the sight category are regular words for which the patterns have not yet been taught.

However, consideration of the words in Book A (second grade) indicates that these categories are not strictly adhered to in practice. The reasons are pedagogical in nature and are generally explained clearly in the teacher's notes.

While a three-part classification of sound-to-spelling correspondences seems appropriate for linguistic descriptions, it is not so easily applicable to spelling instruction. At least eight categories appear to be relevant to learning to spell.

1. Predictable spellings; e.g., /æ/ → a, /k/ → c, k, ck, etc.
2. Frequent but unpredictable spellings; e.g., /e/ → a...e, ai, ay, etc.

3. One frequent but unpredictable spelling introduced before other spellings for the same sound are taught; e.g., a...e introduced before other /e/ spellings.
4. One or two useful exemplars of predictable or frequent but unpredictable spellings that have not been taught; e.g., saw introduced before the aw spelling is taught.
5. Irregular words that are "regular" according to spellings already taught; e.g., final /f/ after a short vowel is spelled ff, but before that rule is taught, if is "regular" by the rule /f/ → f.
6. Irregular but not unusual spellings, generally regular in terms of spelling-to-sound correspondences, but not by sound-to-spelling correspondences; e.g., odd, egg, which have irregular final double consonants.
7. Compounds and affixed words that include a previously taught irregular base form; e.g., into and doing after to and do have been taught.
8. Rare and unpredictable correspondences ("sight words"); e.g., who, yacht.

All eight categories need to be recognized for the purposes of instructional design. It may also be useful for teachers to be aware of these categories and of how all words and rules included in instruction fit into them. Such information for the teacher might be indicated in appropriate notes accompanying instructional materials.

However, an eight-way classification system is clearly too complex for use with students. Nonetheless, it is important that students know how to respond to various words and rules in order to make fullest use of the regularities of English orthography (cf. Cronnell, 1971). And, as

Venezky (1970, see above) suggests, it may be most appropriate to use a classification that indicates "the behaviors which we would expect good spellers to acquire."

A three-way categorization, which parallels the linguistic classification described above and which also includes the eight categories relevant to learning to spell, is most suitable for the design and development of spelling instruction.* These categories are based on the type of learner behavior appropriate for different words and rules. The first class ("predictable spellings") covers words that students should be able to spell simply by listening to the sounds and applying rules that have been taught. This class includes categories 1, 3, 5, and 7 above, where previous instruction provides the basis for spelling new words; the spellings of such words are predictable for the learner. The second class ("unpredictable and rare spellings") covers words that must be memorized by sight. This class includes categories 4 and 8 above, where previous instruction cannot or does not provide the basis for spelling words; the spellings of such words are unpredictable and rare for the learner. The third class ("unpredictable but common spellings") covers words in which the sounds help students know how the words may be spelled, but students must learn the words by memory or must check in a dictionary in order to determine the exact spelling. This class includes categories 2 and 6 above, where previous instruction can provide some, but not a

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*This categorization was suggested by Donna Schwab, who proposed the labels "listen words," "look words," and "listen and look words," with visual cues of an ear, an eye, and an ear and an eye, respectively.

complete, basis for spelling new words; the spellings of such words are unpredictable, but frequent or not unusual for the learner.

These three classes, encompassing the eight categories related to learning to spell, are useful in the design and development of spelling instruction. In addition, they provide a framework for instructional purposes, to guide teachers and students. Such a system accounts for the regularity of English spelling, based on linguistic and pedagogical considerations, and indicates the expected outcome of instruction.

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